**The *Grapes of Wrath* as an American Story: Using *The Grapes of Wrath* as a Lens for Looking at American History and Issues in America Today**

Susan Pellecchia

Graduate Student

NEH Steinbeck Institute 2013

Title of Central Text:

Steinbeck, J. (1939). *The grapes of wrath.* New York: Penguin.

Additional Texts:

Shillinglaw, S. (2011). *A journey into Steinbeck’s California*. Berkeley, CA: Roaring Forties

Press.

Steinbeck, J. (1989). *Working days: The journals of the grapes of wrath.* New York: Penguin.

Steinbeck, J. (2002). The harvest gypsies: Squatters’ camps. In S. Shillinglaw and J. Benson

(Eds.), *America and the Americans* (pp. 78-82). New York: Penguin.

Steinbeck, J. (2002). Starvation under the orange trees. In S. Shillinglaw and J. Benson

(Eds.), *America and the Americans* (pp. 82-87). New York: Penguin.

Essential Question (s):

How is *The* *Grapes of Wrath* truly an American story?

In what ways is this text more than just the story of the Joads?

What other historical moments does the plight of the Joads during the Dust Bowl parallel? What examples of injustice exist in the world today and what should be done?

Grade level:

11

Context:

American History Classroom (Parts can be used in English classroom as well)

Overview:

*The Grapes of Wrath* is a text that does more than tell the story of one family. It is a universal story that touches on many important themes in American history. John Steinbeck wrote this text in order to create change and improve the lives of the migrants of the Dust Bowl. Steinbeck’s conviction and commitment to address the lives of the marginalized is an important lesson for today’s students. This lesson is designed for use at the end of the school year upon completion of the American history curriculum. The goal is to draw connections from *The Grapes of Wrath* to important themes in American history. In addition, this lesson seeks to promote concerns for social justice and prepare students for assuming their roles as active citizens in a democracy.

Objectives:

This is a multipart lesson that can be used in its entirety or in parts that has three central objectives that all seek to address the overarching essential questions:

1. Through an in-depth reading of selected interchapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*, students will observe the five layers of the text.

2. Students will engage in historical research in order to develop their own Document-Based Questions (DBQ’s) that connect to a theme in American history that resonates in their assigned interchapter.

3. Students will report on and provide a solution to an important enduring issue or contemporary problem in American society either inspired by the text and/or their own communities.

**Part 1: Interchapter Analysis Jigsaw Using Five Layers Framework**

Suggested Time: 2-3 days

First, due to the fact that this lesson is designed for a history classroom, the teacher should begin with a brief introduction to *The Grapes of Wrath* for students who are unfamiliar with the narrative and structure of the text. (It is suggested that this lesson should be done at the conclusion of the AP US History curriculum or end of the year in an American History class. In my case, most of the students will have read or are reading the text in their English class.)

Second, it is important to review the historical context of the Dust Bowl conditions and the migration to California. It is suggested to use some of Dorothea Lange’s photographs. The Library of Congress is rich resource. Search the Farm Security Administration photographs for “Dorothea Lange” and there will many to choose from (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/>). Depending on time, you may want to include the viewing of excerpts from Ken Burn’s documentary *The Dust Bowl* (<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/>).

In preparation for this class, students should read the following texts:

1. Chapter 1: Steinbeck’s California, Valley of the World from *A Journey into Steinbeck’s California*. (pp. 3-11) for a brief overview of the concept of layers in Steinbeck’s work.

2. They should also read the following two journalistic pieces found in *America and the Americans*: “The Harvest Gypsies: Squatters’ Camps” (pp. 78-82) and “Starvation Under the Orange Trees” (pp. 82-87).

(NB: Depending on your students, you may want to assign these readings over a couple of nights.)

Use these texts to generate a discussion about John Steinbeck’s observations of the conditions the migrants faced and to provide an overview of the historical context.

Third, before moving into the jigsaw activity, have students consider the following questions:

1. Why did Steinbeck write *The Grapes of Wrath*?

2. How do they think this text was received?

3. Is there anything controversial about this text?

After students have speculated on these questions, provide students with a copy of Steinbeck’s responses to an invitation by John Barry of the Bay area Citizens Committee for a non-partisan forum between labor and capital from *Working Days: The Journals of the Grapes of Wrath* (pp. 151-152). After the students have read Steinbeck’s responses, have them reconsider their responses to the previous questions. To what extent were they right? Do Steinbeck’s responses shed more light on their assumptions about Steinbeck’s motivations?

Fourth, place students into small groups of 3-4 students. In these small groups, students will analyze an assigned interchapter using Steinbeck’s five layers of text. Prior to starting the analysis, be sure to introduce each layer and model the analysis of one interchapter for the students. It is important to explain to students that different scholars have different interpretations of how to define each of the layers. Please note that the description of the layers are, in part, cited from Shillinglaw’s *A Journey into Steinbeck’s California* and a Steinbeck Institute presentation by Susan Shillinglaw on upcoming publication that adopts an ecological perspective by putting Steinbeck “in conversation with Ricketts.” Therefore, in introducing the layers, it is helpful to make specific reference to *A Journey into Steinbeck’s California* (pp. 5-11). Please select some or all of the interchapters to assign to the students and select one for modeling the analysis. It is suggested to use Chapter 21 for an interchapter to model due to its brevity and content.

The following interchapters (listed with key themes/ideas) are suggested for analysis:

Chapter 5 – Farmers, Landowners, “Mathematics,” Bank as Monster, Tractor

Chapter 12 – Migration, Route 66

Chapter 14 – Tractor, I to We

Chapter 15- Roadside Diner, Standardization of world, Transport chapter

Chapter 19 – History of California

Chapter 21 – Migrants, Serfs, Feudalism

Chapter 25 – Capitalism, Science, Starvation

Provide students with “Five Layers Handout“ in order to introduce the five layers and model analysis for the students.

Five Layers Worksheet (See pp. 7-8)

Depending on available time, students can read the chapter in class or for homework. After students have read assigned interchapter, in their small groups they should begin discussing and doing analysis of the text using the “Five Layers Handout.” The goal is that students should become experts on their chapter. After about 20-30 minutes, students will then be assigned to a jigsaw groups with one expert from each original small group. Students should take turns sharing their analysis their assigned interchapters with the others in the jigsaw group. Depending on how many interchapters you assign to the class, the formation of the jigsaw groups may vary.

Finally, conclude this jigsaw with a whole class debriefing of the activity. Consider asking students about trends or themes that they noticed across interchapters, contradictions they saw, how their assumptions were challenged, new understandings that emerged from the activity, and the process of seeing texts in layers.

N.B. Depending on class period length, this activity may be spread over a couple of days.

**Part 2:**

**Historical Research: What other historical moments does the plight of the Joads during the Dust Bowl parallel?**

Suggested Time: 2-3 days

Building on the ideas that emerged from the analysis of the five layers of *The Grapes of Wrath*, particularly the third layer of histories and fourth layer of universals, students will do historical research inspired by their assigned interchapter that culminates in the creation of a DBQ (Document-Based Question).

In groups, students should consider a significant theme that emerges from their assigned interchapter and draw explicit connections to other moments in American history that were studied during the course of the year. Depending on the interchapter, students should consider the following themes: migration, labor, marginalized peoples, power/powerlessness, economic systems/forces & institutions, technology, and ecology. As a group, the students must develop an essential question and construct a DBQ. Each student in the group is responsible for finding one textual primary source and one visual primary source. Each individual student must research the two sources and complete the following the “Sourcing Worksheet.”

Sourcing Worksheet (See pp. 9-10)

Model for the students how to select a theme, find examples of this theme throughout United States History, create an essential question for the DBQ, find and source the primary source documents (both visual and textual), and construct the DBQ.

Please consider using the following example to model the process:

One of the themes that emerge from Chapter 21 is the theme of the conditions that migrant workers face including their poor wages. Lead the class in a brainstorm of some moments in history that connect to this theme (i.e. labor movements of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, Cesar Chavez and migrant farm workers…). Once you have created a list of 3 to 4 ideas, have students brainstorm to create an essential question around this theme and the corresponding historical moments. Remind the students that the essential question should be open-ended and get at the most essential understandings about this theme.

Next, in order to show students how to find and select primary sources, take some time to draw a connection to the plight of migrant workers in California and the efforts of Cesar Chavez to organize farm workers. Depending on available time, go into as great depth or as little depth with this example that suits your needs. Please consult the PBS site for resources (<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/fightfields/cesarchavez.html>). You may consider showing excerpts from documentary film *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers' Struggle*. Use this site and others suggested in the “Resources” link to model for students how to select a both a textual and visual primary source. Use the “Sourcing Worksheet” model how to properly research each primary source.

After modeling for the students, in groups using their assigned interchapter, they should select a theme, discuss connections to other periods of American history, and create an essential question. Provide students with time in class and/or at home to research sources and complete the “Sourcing Worksheet.” Students will join their documents together in the final DBQ. When constructing the DBQ, students should be sure to include relevant source information (author/creator, date…).

Suggested Resources for Researching Primary Sources:

The Library of Congress - <http://www.loc.gov/index.html>

Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History - <https://www.gilderlehrman.org>

PBS - [www.PBS.org](http://www.PBS.org)

Upon completion of DBQ’s, in class, students will swap DBQ’s. Each group must analyze the documents in the DBQ and respond to the essential question. As a group, they must create a thesis and at least three supporting arguments including evidence from at least five sources. As a group they should complete the “DBQ Response Sheet.”

DBQ Response Sheet (See p. 11)

**Part 3:**

**Connections to Today: What examples of injustice exist in the world today and what should be done?**

Suggested Time: 2-3 days

In this final part, students should “think like Steinbeck” and tackle an important issue or problem in American society that is inspired by their reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Students may consider a national issue or a local one from their own community.

Rather than writing a traditional research paper, students should present their research and ideas in one of the following types of formats:

Editorial

Letter

College Essay

Video

Other

When selecting one of these formats, students must carefully consider: Who is the audience?

Please distribute the “Tackling a Contemporary Issue Assignment Sheet” and discuss requirements with students.

Tackling a Contemporary Issue Assignment Sheet (See p. 12)

Consider modeling for the students by presenting on the issue of migrant workers today. Consider using the photography of David Bacon <http://dbacon.igc.org/IndexPS/indexPho.htm#Fa> to show lives of migrant workers and/or using the following articles from the *New York Times*:

War on the Border

By TODD MILLER

Published: August 17, 2013

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/opinion/sunday/war-on-the-border.html?pagewanted=all>

The Lessons of Belle Glade

By CINDY HAHAMOVITCH

Published: July 18, 2013

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/19/opinion/the-lessons-of-belle-glade.html>

Beside a Path to Citizenship, a New Path on Immigration

By [JULIA PRESTON](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/p/julia_preston/index.html)

Published: April 16, 2013

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/17/us/senators-set-to-unveil-immigration-bill.html?pagewanted=all>

Other Resources:

Will the Immigration Bill Help Migrant Farmworkers?

July 19, 2013

by [Lauren Feeney](http://billmoyers.com/author/laurenfeeney/)

<http://billmoyers.com/2013/07/19/what-does-the-immigration-bill-say-about-migrant-farmworkers/>

Migrant farm workers

Fields of tears

**They came to America illegally, for the best of reasons**

Dec 16th 2010 | Arvin and Watsonville, CALIFORNIA |[From the print edition](http://www.economist.com/printedition/2010-12-18)

<http://www.economist.com/node/17722932>

(This article does an explicit comparison to the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath)*

After the all the students have completed their assignments. Provide some time in class for students to share their work. If the time is available, consider adding time for a peer workshop for students to get feedback on their ideas.

**The Five Layers - Student Handout**

Name:

Directions: Ad you read the text, consider the following layers.

(The description of the layers below are, in part, cited from *A Journey into Steinbeck’s California* and Steinbeck Institute presentation by Susan Shillinglaw on upcoming publication that adopts an ecological perspective by putting Steinbeck “in conversation with Ricketts.”)

**Layer 1 – Details** – “wonder of the surface” (p. 5); “names of things, human eccentricities, and the physicality of a place” (p. 6)

What details do you notice? What do you see?

**Layer 2- Associations** – “human interactions” (p. 5); “human interaction with nature” (p. 6)

What are the associations you notice? What are the different groups? How does the text go from I to We?

**Layer 3- Life Histories** – “historical shadows” (p. 5); “human histories crowd California” (p. 8)

What “life histories” are embedded into the text? Are there songs, music, or history lessons?

**Layer 4- Universals** – “universality of life” (p. 5); “Steinbeck crosses borders between place and spirit” (p. 10); “humans are indeed connected to the land and its creatures, t other human histories—and something larger than any particular place or vibration or historical moment” (p. 10).

How is this story universal? How are the experiences of this story similar to other stories? What inter-textual reference do you notice (i.e. Bible, Thoreau…)

**Layer 5- Emergence**

What are the possibilities for growth and change? Are there inexplicable random occurrences? Does this text generate feelings of transcendence (extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience)?

**Sourcing Worksheet -Student Handout**

Name:

**Textual Primary Source**

Title of Document:

Author/Creator:

Date:

Source:

Summary of Document:

Explanation of Significance of Document:

Why did you select this source? How does it get at your essential question?

**Visual Primary Source**

Title of Document:

Creator/Photographer:

Date:

Source:

Description of Document:

Explanation of Significance of Document:

Why did you select this source? How does it get at your essential question?

**DBQ Response Sheet- Student Handout**

Names:

Essential Question:

Thesis:

Supporting Arguments citing evidence from 5 documents:

1.

2.

3.

**Tackling a Contemporary Issue Assignment Sheet – Student Handout**

Research a current injustice or issue in American society that has a connection to *The Grapes of Wrath*. You should “think like Steinbeck” and tackle an important issue or problem in American society. You may go beyond your assigned interchapter. You may consider a national issue or a local one from your own community.

Topics to Consider:

Immigration Debate

Labor in Decline/Push Back – Right to Work States, Loss of Collective Bargaining, Wallmart….

Banking Crisis

Environmental Issues – Human Responsibility and Role of Government in Response (i.e. Katrina, Sandy)

You must do the following:

1. Submit a Proposal for Approval

In a one-page proposal, you must clearly explain why picked your topic and the connection to *The Grapes of Wrath*. You must explain what type of format that you will choose for your final project.

Possible choices include:

Editorial

Letter

College Essay

Video

Other (pending approval)

When selecting one of these format, be sure to carefully consider: Who is the audience?

Provide an annotated bibliography of at least four reliable sources. See the following cite for a model of an annotated bibliography: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/01/>.

2. Once your proposal has been approved, please present your research and solution to the problem in your selected format. You must address the following questions:

1. What is the history of this problem? Who is affected? How? Where? Why? What is the significance of the problem (why should we care)?

2. What has been done to address this problem? To what extent have efforts to address this problem succeeded or failed? Be explicit about limitations of solutions thus far.

3. Provide a viable solution. Clearly outline steps to take and explain why your solution will work.

Please cite all sources.